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THE SEVEN “WHAT MATTERS” IN A SYSTEM NOT DESIGNED FOR US

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Introduction

In a recent episode of his award-winning show, “United Shades of America,” W. Kamau Bell interviews a Black man about systemic racism in America who said, “This country is not designed for us and, in fact, is designed against us.” As an African American, this observation triggered three critical questions.

- How do we thrive and excel in a country steeped in systemic racism—a society fundamentally designed against us rather than for us?
- More specifically, how do we cope, thrive, prosper, and strategically navigate organizational work cultures that do not fully embrace and may even be antagonistic to diversity and inclusion?
- For African Americans and individuals from other historically under-represented groups, including women, to succeed in a nation marred by chaos and enormous uncertainty, what matters?

To answer these questions, I reflected on my forty-year career in higher education—most of it in graduate business education—and work with corporations on how shifting demographics are transforming the workforce, workplaces, and consumer markets. Based on insights gained from these experiences, I think there are seven specific “what matters” that African Americans and individuals from other historically under-represented groups, including women, must embrace to succeed in America moving forward—at least in the near term.

What Matters?

Locus of Control Matters

Locus of control is a psychological concept that refers to “how strongly people believe they have control over the situations and experiences that affect their lives.”¹ You either have an internal or external locus of control.

People with an internal locus of control generally believe that their success or failure is a result of the effort and hard work they invest in their education and jobs. People with an external local of control generally believe that their successes or failures result from external factors beyond their control, such as luck, fate, circumstance, injustice, bias, prejudice, or stereotypes. Like their external locus of control counterparts, people with an internal locus of control recognize inequities within the system; however, unlike those with an external locus of control, their strategies and actions for dealing with disparate treatment are internally as opposed to externally motivated.

If—and when—you start looking to others in the employment arena as your source of self-worth is when your career trouble begins in a system that is not built for us. In the workplace, peers and superiors will play you like a drum when they figure out you have an external as opposed to an internal locus of control. They will say things or send conflicting signals to keep you off balance, causing you to question not only your self-worth but also whether you belong in the organization.

Making matters worse, once you begin to question your self-worth or fit for the organization—what some refer to as stereotype threat²—your performance typically begins a downward spiral and career mobility is stalled or halted. When confronted with such situations, people with an external locus of control devise strategies to cope and navigate barriers or vote with their feet to go to an organization deemed a better fit for their skills.

People with an internal locus of control go to great lengths to understand organizational culture—both the written and unwritten rules. They do their homework to understand past patterns of both upward mobility and disparate

¹ <https://www.edglossary.org/locus-of-control/>

² See Steve Stroessner and Catherine Good, “Stereotype Threat: An Overview,” Reducing Stereotype Threat.org., available at https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype_threat_overview.pdf. Toni Schrader and William M. Hall, 2014, “Stereotype threat in School and at Work: Putting Science into Practice,” Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Vol 1, 30-37, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2372732214548861>.

treatment of historically under-represented individuals and groups, including any pending or resolved class action discrimination suits.

People with an internal locus of control also recognize and understand that HR's ultimate role and responsibility is not to protect the employee but rather the employer. For this reason, they do not view HR as an unbiased arbiter of workplace concerns and grievances and therefore do not expect balanced or equitable treatment from the unit.

The bottom line: If you do not have an internal locus of control, start developing one now with all deliberate speed. If this shift is difficult for you, establish relationships with friends and colleagues whose career goals and aspirations are internally—as opposed to externally—motivated and driven.

Networks Matter

Irrespective of whether your locus of control is internal or external, success is more likely if you have a geographically expansive and diverse network of family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues to draw upon for career advice and guidance. Why? Because diverse networks afford you access to information about unwritten rules, landmines to avoid, and propitious opportunities to pursue that otherwise might be inaccessible. Moreover, such networks can help you manage the often-felt experience of isolation and loneliness, especially if you are the only one or one of only a few under-represented minorities and women in the workplace.

Developing and maintaining diverse networks is hard work. It requires cultural stretch, a willingness to put yourself in places or situations where you might not feel comfortable. Going to the beer bust even if you do not like or drink beer. Attending the party even if they will not be playing your type of music. If you are in an unfamiliar, uncomfortable setting with people with whom you do not normally interact or interface, you are probably in the right place career wise.

Being in such settings and engaging in courageous listening oftentimes can provide valuable information that can help you avoid or circumnavigate potential mine fields and unwritten rules that all too often derail the careers of African Americans, other people of color, and women. In addition, you can make connections with people in such situations that potentially can become lifelong network partners—if you properly maintain and nurture the relationships.

Moving forward, creating a robust virtual network of diverse ties also is important because remote work is likely to be more widespread post-COVID-19.³ If you have not already done it, leverage every social networking tool at your disposal to develop a virtual global network of individuals and sources of information that can add value in your career progression. Develop the capacity to distinguish accurate and reliable information from fake or inaccurate information on social media.⁴

Contrarian Views Matter

What is a contrarian? The person you love to hate! Be sure you have at least one in your immediate circle of confidantes.

Why? Because this will be the person who will keep you honest. The person that will always ask the hard or difficult questions you either have not thought about or do not wish to entertain or consider.

Contrarians strategically position you for battle and success in the marketplace. They prepare you for the unanticipated questions or challenges you are likely to face as a person of color or as a woman. They help you respond to difficult and, in some instances, offensive questions or issues in a calm, collective, thoughtful, and reflective manner. They prevent you from falling into the trap of being labeled as the angry Black man or the overly assertive Black woman—the dreaded you know what that begins with a capital B.

Reputational Power Matters

HR professionals assert that talent is the new "it"—the new capitalism in today's VUCA – volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous — world. But, "talent isn't just people, it is people with specific skills, behaviors, and ways of operating ... in a chaotic, global environment, that fits the needs of an organization."⁵ In today's volatile global environment, work is not where you go; rather it is what you do.⁶ When someone mentions your name in company dialogue, what you do for the organization should immediately come to mind.

³ EY Belgium, 2020, Why Remote Working will be the new Normal, Even After COVID-19, September 7, available at https://www.ey.com/en_be/covid-19/why-remote-working-will-be-the-new-normal-even-after-covid-19.

⁴ Brooke Donald, 2016, Stanford Researchers Find Students Have Trouble Judging the Credibility of Information Online, Stanford Graduate School of Education, November 22, available at <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>.

⁵ Jeffrey A. Joerres, Entering the Human Age: Thought Leadership Insights, Milwaukee, Wisconsin: ManpowerGroup, Inc., available at http://www.manpowergroup.com/wps/wcm/connect/8a0aa2a7-d6ed-4845-96e0-b99f8e84e558/EnteringtheHumanAge_082013.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

⁶ Anne Weisberg and William D. Eggers, 2010, "Workplace Flexibility as the New Normal," FCW, May 14, available at <http://fcw.com/articles/2010/05/14/fcw-challenge-workforce-flexibility-telework.aspx>

As companies increasingly leverage technology (mobile broadband and mobile cellular technologies) and engage in recruitment via strategic domestic and international migration to find the talent they need—a trend the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly will accelerate—a borderless workforce will likely be even more of the norm in the future.⁷ To survive, thrive, and prosper in a borderless work environment, you must develop your own personal brand.

Personal branding requires that you cast aside the usual descriptions employers depend on to situate employees in their firms or organizations.⁸ In developing your personal brand, you must answer the question: What do I do for a living? However, you must not frame your answer to this question in terms of job title or function. Instead, you must explain the end result of what you do.

In developing your personal brand, you must think of yourself differently. Start by identifying qualities or characteristics that distinguish you from your peers—your most noteworthy traits, your greatest strengths, and what makes you stand out. If you are going to become a brand, you have to focus on what you do that adds value.⁹ Personal branding requires that you develop “reputational power:” That is, recognition for making significant, value-added contributions in some area of expertise.¹⁰

In addition, part of your personal brand must be a demonstrated ability to interface successfully with associates, collaborators, competitors, customers, and clients who not only are diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and international origin, but also generationally,¹¹ politically, and ideologically.¹²

Predictability Matters

Personal branding extends beyond your performance attributes. What also matters is your physical attributes and the way you manage your presence—popularly referred to as impression management¹³—in the workplace. I am not

⁷ Gil Press, 2020, “The Future of Work Post-COVID-19,” Forbes, July 15, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gilpress/2020/07/15/the-future-of-work-post-covid-19/#60c502b24baf>

⁸ Tom Peters, 1999, *The Brand You 50: Or: Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself from an ‘Employee’ into a Brand That Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

⁹ Richard Stooker, “Marketing is How You Show Others How You Can Help Them, Including Selling Yourself for Jobs and Promotions,” Quintessential Careers, available http://www.quintcareers.com/printable/job-seeking_selling.html

¹⁰ Rob Swanson, “Take Control of Your Personal Branding,” Quintessential Careers, available at http://www.quintcareers.com/personal_branding.html.

¹¹ There are five generations in the marketplace today—Pre-Boomers, Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z—all of whom bring to the new world of work different core values, communication and interaction styles, work ethics and values, leadership styles and perspectives on feedback and rewards.

¹² James H. Johnson, Jr. and Jeanne Milliken Bonds, 2020, *Leading, Managing and Communicating in an Era of Certain-Uncertainty*, Kenan Institute White Paper, August, available at <https://kenaninstitute.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Leading-Managing-and-Communicating.pdf>

¹³ Jennifer Grant, 2020, *Impression Management is Important to Your Success*, May 8, available at <https://jennifergrantinternational.com>.

suggesting that you go out and hire an image consultant, although some people do. What I am suggesting, however, is that you figure how to accentuate your positives and downplay your shortcomings in terms of presentation of self.

Further, once you figure out the image or impression you want others to have of you, especially your superiors in the organization, you must exemplify a high degree of predictability in maintaining the impression you make on others on a routine or daily basis. Moreover, it is strategically important to recognize when you need to make adjustments in your impression management—most often necessitated as you move through critical stages of the life cycle.

Along with strong performance metrics, predictable impression management does not guarantee but heightens your chances of upward mobility within the organization. For the specific role or position you aspire to achieve, you should always generally strive to look the part.

Sponsorship Matters

Understand the difference between mentorship and sponsorship within organizations.¹⁴ As research has documented, it is not your strong ties but, rather, the strength of your weak ties that matter most in career growth and development.

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Typically, your strong ties are with people who are a lot like you. How many of you hang out with people you do not like? Usually, aside from emotional support, you accrue little, if any, new learning from such ties. More often than not, you gain the most valuable information, advice, and insights from people in positions of influence with whom you have established rapport that allows you to reach out whenever you need critical career advice and guidance.

You do not interact with these individuals on a routine basis, which is why we refer to such connections as “weak” ties. In most cases, these are older, most seasoned contacts who not only have been around the block a time or two but also are embedded in diverse networks that they may be able to leverage for you—an indirect benefit—if they choose to do so.

com/blog/impression-management-is-important-to-your-success. Grant offers six tips on how to manage the impression you make on others: be self-aware, be thoughtful and prudent, master your emotions, observe rules of etiquette, have courage and conviction, and be positive.

¹⁴ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, 2013, (Forget a Mentor) Find a Sponsor: The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career, Harvard Business Review Press, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Forget_a_Mentor_Find_a_Sponsor/FV-AtZGRrawC?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

¹⁵ Eileen Brown, 2011, “Strong and Weak Ties: Why Your Weak Ties Matter,” Social Media Today, June 30, available at <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/strong-and-weak-ties-why-your-weak-ties-matter>. Devin Soni, 2019, “The Power of Weak Ties,” Towards Data Science, July 29, available at <https://towardsdatascience.com/the-power-of-weak-ties-f1049c93f3a3>.

These individuals are mentors when they are willing to give you advice.¹⁶ They become sponsors when they demonstrate a willingness to leverage their reputations and connections to advance your career. What is important to note here is, you do not choose your sponsor; rather, your sponsor, if you are fortunate enough to get one, chooses you. Further, the decision to sponsor typically is based on your demonstrated hard and soft skills, brand promise, authenticity, and predictability—all the things that go into the so-called “fit” box for the organization. Your challenge—and opportunity—is to figure out what’s in the proverbial organizational fit box and ensure that you are sponsor ready, fully recognizing that you cannot audition for sponsorship.¹⁷

Intersectionality Matters

What is it? Introduced by the eminent law professor and critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw,¹⁸ intersectionality is “the idea that when it comes to thinking about how inequalities persist, categories like gender, race, and class are best understood as overlapping and mutually constitutive rather isolated and distinct.” More pointedly, intersectionality is “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”¹⁹

Do not let intersectionality kick you in the butt. In a society not designed for us, you cannot afford to sit around waiting for that next great promotion which might never come, especially as you age. All other things being equal, if the market speaks, you must always be prepared to move to take advantage of the next great opportunity. The time in your life when intersectionality becomes a barrier or obstacle varies depending your race, gender and sexual orientation as well your occupation.

For African American males, at least those of us in academia, I believe intersectionality kicks in at around age 55, when being male, Black, and aging become a liability for any future career mobility. Prior to age 55, offers came

¹⁶ Recognizing the structural barriers that African Americans and other under-represented groups face, research suggests that the most successful mentors proactively reach out and offer advice and guidance—a process variously referred to as intrusive, prescriptive, or developmental mentoring—rather than waiting for the under-represented individual to contact them. Intrusive mentoring has proven to be a powerful tool in improving academic success for historically under-represented students enrolled in higher education institutions. See *Achieving the Dream*, available at <https://www.achievingthedream.org/intervention/14277/intrusive-mentoring>. Properly structured, it can have a similar effect in the private sector.

¹⁷ See Sylvia Hewlett, *Sponsor Ready*, available at http://hewlettconsultingpartners.com/expertise/Sponsor-Ready_Brochure.pdf

¹⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, 1989, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, available at <https://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf>. See also International Women’s Development Agency, 2018, *What Does Intersectional Feminism Actually Mean?*, May 11, available at https://iwda.org.au/what-does-intersectional-feminism-actually-mean/?gclid=EAlalQobChMI7oLyh6TX6wIVe5S2Ch1QOAcgEAAAYASAAEgJHGfD_BwE

¹⁹ Merriam-Webster, *Definition of Intersectionality*, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>.

frequently—deanships and higher administration opportunities, which I did not take because I had elder care responsibilities.

Whatever the timeframe is, develop a strategy to make your major career moves prior to the time when intersectionality will become a barrier. Intersectionality, of course, is less of a barrier for people who have sponsors or serious hooks ups, especially if the sponsor is a white male.²⁰

Postscript

These seven “what matters” do not guarantee success in a society that is not built for us. However, if strategically pursued, I firmly believe they can enhance the likelihood of success until we implement policies, procedures, and practices that eliminate systemic racism in America.

²⁰ Among a pool of well-educated Black women, those with at least one white male in their immediate sphere of influence earned on average \$17,000 more annually than their comparably educated Black women who had a racially homogenous network of confidantes. See James H. Johnson, Jr., Elisa Jayne Bienenstock, and Walter C. Farrell, Jr., 1999, “Bridging Social Networks and Female Labor Force Participation in a Multi-Ethnic Metropolis.” *Urban Geography*, Vol. 20: 3-30, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/0272-3638.20.1.3>.

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